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ABSTRACT

Teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) are encouraged to conduct classroom research to (1) discover what happens when they teach and students try to learn, assess and improve teaching practices; monitor innovations in teaching, syllabus, or materials; and investigate problems in the classroom. Simple steps are outlined: developing a plan of action to change or improve what is occurring; implementing the plan; observing the effects and the context in which they occur; and reflecting on the results. The teacher is guided through the process of: formulating a research question from among a variety of issues, based on teacher experience or student comments; checking to see if other teachers and researchers have addressed similar problems; collecting data using diaries, interviews, questionnaires, tests, observation, and field notes; and reviewing the data with the research question in mind. (Contains 9 references.) (MSE)

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Action Research: Using your Classroom for Professional Development

Whether teachers have several years' experience or have only just begun their careers, there are certain components of classroom success that will remain opaque unless they make a concerted effort to learn more about what is happening during instructional events. Teachers can do this by using their own or their colleagues' classroom as a learning environment. This is referred to as action research. In this paper I will introduce Action Research and discuss how it can benefit the EFL and ESL teacher.

What is Action Research ?

It is a principled way of looking at one's teaching and reflecting upon it. It refers to "teacher initiated classroom investigation which seeks to increase the teacher understanding of classroom teaching and learning, and to bring about change in classroom practice" (Richards and Lockehart, 1994, p.12). Action research is generally undertaken through small-scale projects in the teacher's own classroom.

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Rationale for Action Research

In many, if not most, EFL and ESL situations teachers play a passive or a non-existing role in curriculum research, materials development and selection, and evaluation. These issues are often left to researchers and "experts". This situation is the outcome of the separation between theory and practice. Traditionally there has been a clear separation between professional development and research. Action research bridges this gap as it is an attempt to transfer theoretical knowledge into practice (Van Lier, 1994).

We all have our classroom routines that we develop over the years and we become comfortable with. These routines vary according to the nature of the class dynamics, the level of the students, and the curriculum in use. One danger of not reflecting on these conscious and sub-conscious routines and rituals is that we might become secure and relaxed with them and the ways of interacting with our students. We might become too busy teaching and ensuring the syllabus is taught that we ignore our teaching. Action research enables us to explore and even "discover" implicit theories and beliefs we hold about our teaching.

We often conduct "mini" action research projects when we think about aspects of our teaching and try to act on them or improve them. We often share with our colleagues daily classroom frustrations

and successes, and we exchange ideas and expertise but often stop there. Rarely do we systematically investigate what goes on in our classroom and there are several reasons for teachers' reluctance to exchange intuition and impulse for systematic inquiry. Van Lier mentions some of the reasons why teachers find it difficult to conduct classroom research:

> those of us who work in teacher education know that one of the most difficult things to balance in a course is the tension between theoretical and practical aspects of the profession. ...Theory and practice are not perceived as integral parts of a teacher's practical professional life. ...This situation is the result of communication gaps caused by an increasingly opaque research technocracy, restrictive practices in educational institutions and bureaucracies (e.g. not validating research time), and overburdening teachers who cannot conceive of ways of theorising and researching that come out of daily work and facilitate that daily work.
>
> (van Lier 1992:3)

These obstacles should not discourage teachers from approaching their classroom with an action research orientation. What teachers can benefit from action research in terms of professional development outweighs the obstacles and the bureaucratic frustrations mentioned by van Lier. A review of the most recent literature on action research reveals that teachers are encouraged to conduct classroom research to:

-find out what happens when they teach and students try to learn

-assess and improve teaching practices

-monitor innovations in teaching, syllabus or in the materials

-investigate problems in the classroom.

Action research, therefore, is not meant to be an exercise in research using lengthy procedures and techniques. The term research can make some teachers skeptical as it might imply complicated statistical analyses of data collected over a long time. Mazillo (1994) sums up action research in a short and a clear statement. She states that "action research is investigation into any classroom issue that puzzles a teacher. Using simple tools such as questionnaires, tests, and observation, a teacher can find a satisfactory answer to that puzzle" (p. 45). These tools are not necessarily simple tools as described by Mazillo but can be used for small-scale classroom projects in a very uncomplicated manner.

- **Steps of Action Research**

- The steps of action research can be summed up as follows:
- 1 develop a plan of action to change or improve what is already happening
- 2 act to implement the plan
- 3 observe the effects of action in the context in which it occurs
  4 reflect on these effects
-

- **What question should I ask?**

- The first step in action research is to identify a research or an investigation question. This should not be a difficult step if the teacher has adopted an action research approach to her teaching. One can keep a journal about any reflection on teaching and learning that comes to mind. Puzzling

classroom episodes and misunderstandings can be turned into questions. Students can also be a source of research questions for they often make remarks about their learning experiences and difficulties they encounter. If peer observation is possible, comments made by teachers can also be noted down for possible use as classroom research questions. The questions should be important not trivial, and answerable (Nunan 1992, Chamot, 1994). Some questions, although important, are not practical for action research. An example of an impossible question to answer through action research is, "Will my students get rid of their fossilized errors by the end of the academic year?" or "what writing levels will they achieve by the end of the program?'. These questions require longitudinal studies with the administration of pre and post tests. An example of an unimportant question is "what type of sports do my students like and how do sports help them learn English?". Teachers can look at the following issues to formulate research questions:

- classroom management
- organizing group and pair activities handling transitions between activities

task instructions: how you give them; how the students interpret them
teacher behavior
questioning and comprehension check techniques
giving feedback on learner errors
praising
wait time and its effect on students' participation

- simplification of speech
- **student behavior**
  student participation pattern
  student language use in whole class and small group work
  subject comprehension problems
- materials

- syllabus/curriculum
- testing procedure
- nonverbal behavior

Chamot (1994, p.5) suggests a set of questions that can guide action research in an elementary foreign language classroom. They are, in fact, appropriate for secondary and tertiary levels EFL and ESL classrooms. These are some of the questions:

- What themes or content topics are most interesting to students at particular grade levels?
- What interlanguage features characterize learners' second language at different points in instructional time?

What differences exist between successful and less successful language learners in these areas : (a) attitudes toward the target language and culture; (b) access to/use of L2 outside the classroom (e.g., parents, community, media); (c) use of appropriate language learning strategies; (d) level of achievement in L1; (e) transfer of knowledge, skills, or strategies from L1; (f) level of self-confidence in own language learning ability.

Richards and Lockhart (1994) suggest a set of questions that can be used in critical reflection. To collect data about teaching, teachers can be guided by questions such as the following.

- What beliefs do my learners hold about learning and teaching?
- How do these beliefs influence their approach to learning?

- What learning styles and strategies do my learners favor?
- How do my learners perceive my role as a teacher?
- What form or structure do my lessons have?
- How do I communicate goals to my learners?
- What patterns of language use occur when I teach?

This is only a sample of questions teachers can use to reflect on their own teaching and to embark on small scale research. Every classroom has its own dynamics, rituals, and routines that can inspire reflective questions. Action research targets a particular group with particular needs. Teachers need to develop questions appropriate to the specific situations they have in their classrooms.

Has my question been addressed?

Before embarking on an action research project, it is useful and helpful to check if other teachers and researchers have addressed the same question. Reading findings of action research can help you save time, avoid pitfalls, and learn from others' recommendations. Because every classroom is unique, teachers should not be discouraged if they find out that what they have in mind for a classroom research project has already been investigated. The results of one particular action research project are not necessarily generalisable to other settings. In addition, teachers can learn about research techniques and data analysis by reading previous studies.

How do I collect data?

Because the ultimate goal of action research is the improvement of teaching practice, it is not interested in obtaining generalisable scientific knowledge (Nunan, 1990). The teacher has to decide about what data collection tool could facilitate his/her project. Data can be collected through the common research tools, such as diaries, interview, questionnaires, tests, classroom observation, and field notes.

Diaries can be used by both teachers and students to note down their experience and thoughts related to language teachers and learning. Entries to diaries should be continuous and not sporadic.

Interviews: structured interviews can be effective in collecting data concerning students attitudes and thoughts. In a structured interview the teacher has to prepare and write the questions ahead of time. The questions should be clear. Teachers should avoid questions that lead learners to expected answers. In a structured interview only the prepared set of questions are used whereas in an unstructured interview teachers do not have to follow or use a ready set of questions. At the end of a class they can ask a student his her opinion about a particular activity and then note down the answer.

- Think-aloud interviews are another introspective method. A student can be asked questions while completing a reading or a writing task. The teacher can ask the student "Why did you choose this answer?" or "What are you thinking ?".

Questionnaires are often used to collect data from students. These can be written in the students' first language if necessary. This can be the case for interviews and think-aloud interviews.

Classroom observation is one of the most efficient tools of data collection. With a clear question in mind, the teacher can observe his/her classroom using an audiotape or a videotape if possible. This should be done systematically. For example, segments of fifteen minutes can be videotaped throughout a period of one week. Teachers can also take notes while teaching. This might seem difficult or impractical but with good time management teachers can note down important episodes that can help them answer their research questions. Field notes can serve as ongoing data analysis.

Now what do I do?

Now that data are collected, the teacher must review them with the research question in mind. Data analysis does not have to be a headache if the researcher does it systematically. Peers can help and add a different perspective.

Once data are reviewed, an intervention plan has to be developed and tried out. It is this step that is the fruit of action research. With data in hand teachers can plan to monitor and modify their teaching practices. A teacher who thinks that he controls classroom talk and allows his students little opportunities for interaction can videotape several sessions and study the pattern of language use in his classroom. Teacher often control interaction

and talk distribution is often unbalanced. For such a project, videotaped classroom observation is the ideal data collection tool as it enables the teacher to study his talk across various instructional contexts. An intervention plan can include various group and pair activities where the teacher facilitates instruction but does not dominate it. The type of questions used by the teacher could be the source of his control of talk. If this is the case teachers have to modify their questions and try to use divergent questions. These are the sort of questions that encourage students to use their own language and use higher thinking abilities. Convergent questions, on the other hand, lead to short responses and their answers are already known to the teacher.

After the intervention the teacher should not stop there. It is important to check if the action taken to deal with a particular situation has led to any change. For the above example, the teacher can videotape his class for the same amount of time and then see if the change in his clasroom management and type of questions has increased his learners' share of classroom talk.

Action research is an attempt at professional development. It seeks knowledge for a particular instructional situation. From personal experience and being a non-native speaker of English, I find action research a useful and a non-threatenning method of self-evaluation. I looked at my self in videotapes and was, of course, terrified at what I saw. I was, however, very pleased to discover my shortcomings.

Beasley and Riordan (1981) mention the virtues of teacher research in a clear manner:

- It begins with and builds on the knowledge that teachers have already accumulated.
- It focuses on the immediate interests and concerns of classroom teachers.
- It matches the subtle, organic process of classroom life.
- It builds on the 'natural' process of evaluation and research which teachers carry out daily.
- It bridges the gap between understanding and action by merging the role of the researcher and practitionner.
- It sharpens teachers' critical awareness through observation, recording and analysis of classroom events and thus acts as a consciousness-raising exercise.
- It provides teachers with better information than they already have about what is actually happening in the classroom and why.
- It helps teachers better articulate teaching and learning processes to their colleagues and interested community members.
- It bridges the gap between theory and practice.

(1981, p. 3

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